A Poet's Daughter

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A Poet's Daughter

by blueaccord

Summary

Robin comes out to her father, Todd, which causes the domino effect of Todd Anderson assuring his daughter that nothing is wrong with her and then finally facing the years he had at Welton so many years ago and the love he had for Neil Perry.

Chapter 1

Todd Anderson had always known his daughter was different. Quick-tongued, fast-thinking, her brain like a kaleidoskope (i don't get why you englishers spell it with a 'c' so no) always flipping to the next color before the world had time to catch up. He'd recognized that restlessness. He'd once called it poetry.

Tonight, though, Robin looked nothing like poetry. She looked like a storm that didn't know where to rain. It was nearly eleven when she knocked on his study door. One, two, three taps, uneven like her breath.

Todd set down the red pen he'd been using to grade essays and called softly, "Come in, Birdie."

Robin slipped inside and closed the door behind her. Her hair was messy, messier than usual, and her blue eyes were rimmed red, the way they got when she'd been fighting herself for hours.

She groans and sinks down onto the sofa, opposite of her father's desk. "I'm dying. Bury me in the backyard with the garden gnomes. Tell the neighbors I went peacefully."

Todd moves closer, sinking into the armchair next to her with the practiced gentleness of a man who spent years living in rooms where silence was safer than sound. "Want to talk about it?" He was used to her exzentriker (seriously too lazy to translate this fucking word it's 4am when im writing this… maybe ill go back an translate tomorrow) by now, even though they didn't make sense to him a lot of the time.

Robin turns her head just enough to glare at him through a curtain of hair. "No."

Then, deflating, “Maybe.”

Todd’s heart cracked in the old familiar way it always did when she sounded small. She pushed herself up to sit on the edge of the sofa, bouncing one knee, fingers tugging at the hem of her jeans. Todd waited. He’d learned long ago that forcing words made them brittle. Let them come when they were ready.

Finally she exhaled, shaky. “I think there’s something wrong with me.”

Todd fought every instinct to flinch. “Why would you think that?”

Robin swallowed. “There’s this girl,” she said, the word landing like a confession. “Her name’s Tammy Thompson and she’s… she’s stupidly pretty, like- like if Barbie had a cousin who read library books. And I-” Her voice cracked. “Every time she smiles at me I feel like my ribcage is melting. And the other day she touched my arm when she laughed and I thought I was gonna die. Like actually *die.”*

She was rambling, it was at the point of spiraling. Todd placed a gentle hand on hers. “Robin,” he said quietly, “do you like her?”

Robin stared at him, terrified. “You- I think I do. And I shouldn’t. I mean—girls aren’t supposed to like girls. Not like… that.”

Todd inhaled slowly. There it was. The real fear. He felt suddenly 17 again, standing in a snow-lit courtyard at Welton, a beating heart in his throat and another boy’s laughter echoing in his chest. “That’s okay, Birdie.”

“You don’t know that.” Her voice cracks. “What if something’s wrong with me? What if I’m—”

“Different?” Todd finishes gently. “Unusual? Not like everyone else?” He offers the smallest, softest smile. “Those can be very good things.”

Robin searches his face, confused. “You’re not… freaked out?”

“No,” he says, and means it with every breath he’s ever taken. “Not even a little.”

“But- Dad, I like *girls.”* She says it like a crime. And maybe it was, for the time at least. But Todd thought no such thing.

“And?” Todd tilts his head. “Girls are wonderful.”

“Not like *that!”*

“Exactly like that,” Todd replies. “And it’s okay.” He squeezed her hand. “Birdie, listen to me. There is nothing- nothing *wrong* with you.”

Her eyes filled despite the brave tilt of her chin. “How do you *know?”*

Because I learned it too late, he almost said. Because I didn’t get to tell him. Instead Todd smiled, soft and sad. “Because once… a long time ago… I fell in love with someone too.”

Robin blinked, thrown. “A woman?”

Todd shook his head gently. “No.”

Robin’s breath caught.

“He was… a poet,” Todd murmured, the word weighted with a reverence she’d never heard from him before. “The bravest, brightest person I ever knew. He made me feel seen. Like I was allowed to breathe in a world that kept telling me not to. He loved words and laughter and the kind of beauty most people are too scared to notice.”

Robin stared, sitting up straighter. “Dad…”

“I cared for him very deeply,” Todd continued, voice growing quieter. “The way you care about Tammy, I think.”

A tear slid down Robin’s cheek. She swiped at it angrily. “But I thought- I mean- don’t people hate-?”

“Some do,” Todd admitted. “But that’s about their fear, not your worth. And it doesn’t change who you are, or who you’re allowed to love.”

Robin let out a sob that shook her shoulders. Todd opened his arms, and she fell into them like she hadn’t done since childhood. He held her tight, resting his cheek on the top of her hair.

After a long while, she whispered, “Was he your first love?”

“He was,” Todd answered softly. “And he taught me things I’m glad I can teach you now.”

Robin sniffed. “Like what?”

Todd kissed her hair. “That your heart isn’t a mistake. And neither is the way it loves.”

She pulled back just enough to see his face. “What happened to him?”

Todd’s throat tightened. “He… passed away. When we were young.”

Robin’s expression crumpled. “I’m sorry.”

“So am I,” he said. “But loving him is something I’ll never regret. Not a single day.”

Robin wiped her face. “Do you think… do you think I’m going to be okay?”

Todd gave her the kind of smile that had once belonged to a boy who believed in standing on desks to say what he wanted. “More than. I think you’re going to be extraordinary.”

She laughed wetly. “Even if Tammy Thompson likes boys who wear too much hair gel and pubescent cologne?”

“Even then,” Todd chuckled.

Robin leaned into him again, and Todd held her, thinking of a winter night. A cave of boys reading poetry by candlelight, and a smile that had changed his life. He’d lost Neil, but he’d gained Robin. Brilliant, defiant, and awkward Robin.

Todd looks at the mantle again, at the edges of a life he once lived, the one that shaped the father he became. For the first time in years, the memory of Neil Perry doesn’t hurt. It warms. He thinks Neil would have liked Robin. She has his fire. His stubbornness. His tenderness, too, hidden just beneath the thorns.

Todd presses a kiss to the top of her head. “You’re going to be okay,” he says.

Robin closes her eyes. “Yeah,” she whispers. “I think I might be. Thanks, dad”

He would make sure she never felt broken for something as beautiful as love.

The house was silent again, almost too silent. Robin had gone to bed, leaving the faint scent of peppermint shampoo and nervous teenage tears in the air. Todd sat on the couch long after she left, hands folded, staring at nothing. He should have felt relief.

Pride, even. He *had* been the father she needed. But instead there was an old ache rising in him—slow, persistent, like the tide returning to shore no matter how many times he tried to deny it water.

Neil Perry.

Todd closed his eyes. It had been years since he let himself think the name fully, without flinching. He stood, wandered to the bookshelf, and touched the spine of a collection of Keats the way one touches a bruise—carefully, already knowing it would hurt. He opened it. A folded, yellowing paper slipped out. Todd's breath hitched.

Neil's handwriting.

God, he'd forgotten how alive it looked.

"T—
Meet me after study hall? Found something I want to show you.
—N"

That was all. Just a note. But Todd felt seventeen again, pulse quickening the same way it had the day Neil had slipped it into his book. The memory rose up around him—unavoidable, vivid.

Todd had been waiting in the courtyard, shifting nervously from foot to foot. Snow was just beginning to gather, tiny flakes catching in his hair. He remembered clutching the note so tightly it wrinkled. Neil arrived at a brisk jog, cheeks flushed, eyes bright with that spark he carried everywhere.

"There you are!" Neil grinned, brushing snowflakes from his eyebrows. "Come on."

He didn't wait for a reply; he just hooked his fingers lightly around Todd's wrist, too light to be a grab, too intentional to be an accident,

and tugged him along the path toward the woods behind Welton. Todd remembered the warmth of Neil's hand *exactly*.

He remembered every second of trying not to think about it.

"Where are we going?" Todd managed, breath puffing in the cold.

"You'll see."

Neil always said that. And Todd always followed.

They ducked past the tree line, boots crunching in the frost. Neil finally stopped at a small clearing where stones made a rough, natural circle. Almost like a miniature amphitheater.

"I found it earlier," Neil said, releasing Todd's wrist. "It reminded me of… I don't know. A stage. Or maybe a secret fort. Thought you might like it."

"Me?"

"Yeah," Neil said simply, as if that were obvious. "You get quiet when the others get loud. I figured maybe you'd want a place that's just… ours."

Ours.

Todd's ears went hot. "But- But you're the actor, Neil. I'm-"

Neil hopped onto one of the stones, arms spread dramatically. “Picture it, Todd! A midnight performance. Snow as our audience. The spirits of fallen poets as our critics.”

Todd laughed, breathless from more than the cold. “Neil, it’s freezing.”

“So? Drama thrives in adversity.” Neil jumped down, landing too close, too easily in Todd’s space. His grin softened. “Besides… I needed to see you.”

Todd swallowed hard. “Why?”

Neil’s smile faltered. Not in fear, but in honesty. “Because I like talking to you. And you listen in a way no one else does.”

Todd felt that like a blow and a gift all at once. The wind whispered through the branches. Neil shoved his hands into his coat pockets, rocking on his heels.

“Sometimes,” Neil said quietly, “I wish I could tell you things I can’t tell anyone else.”

Todd’s heart hammered. “You can tell me.”

Neil looked at him. Really looked with his eyes lingering a second longer than friendship required. For years Todd had wondered if that was the moment. If Neil had almost said it. If he himself had almost answered.

But Neil just exhaled, a puff of warm breath in the cold. “Maybe someday.”

Then, to lighten the moment, he grabbed Todd’s hands and spun him clumsily in the snow, laughing like joy itself. Todd barely remembered the spinning. He remembered the warmth of Neil’s gloves against his own, the way Neil looked at him like he was part of the joke, part of the world, part of *him*. That night ended with Neil walking Todd back to the dorms, their shoulders brushing, both pretending not to notice.

But Todd noticed.

He noticed everything.

Todd opened his eyes, finding his study dim and too still. The memory left a tightness in his chest, painful, but also… treasured. He pressed the note between the pages again, fingers lingering. For years he had punished himself by avoiding these memories, thinking it was disloyal to feel joy when the story had ended in tragedy.

But Robin, sweet, brave Robin, had looked at him tonight with fear he recognized too well. He’d wanted to give her something he never had: the certainty that she wasn’t wrong for loving differently. And in doing so, he’d opened a door to his own past. A door he’d kept locked far too long.

Todd closed the book gently. “Thank you,” he whispered to the air, unsure if he meant Neil, or Robin, or both.

His heart hurt. But it also felt full. Maybe memories didn’t just haunt.

Chapter 2

Todd was grading papers downstairs when he heard it. A very suspicious crash.

Then, “I’m fine! I mean- I might not be fine? But the bookshelf’s fine!" A pause. "Mostly!”

Todd sighed, set his papers aside, and made his way up the stairs. Robin was standing on a chair in his closet, surrounded by a minor avalanche of dusty binders, photo albums, and a shoebox that had clearly fallen from the top shelf. She sheepishly grins at her father and shoots finger guns at him awkwardly like a wet cat.

“What,” Todd said gently, “are you doing?”

Robin pointed at the closet with her chin, indignantly. “You said I could borrow a flannel! The closet attacked me. *I’m* the victim here.”

Todd smiled despite himself. “It looks like the closet won.”

Robin hopped down. “Well, in its dramatic collapse, which, for the record, was not my fault, *this* fell.”

She nudged the shoebox with her toe. Todd’s breath hitched. He didn’t even need to open it. He remembered the weight, the shape, the exact way the cardboard dipped in the middle. Over thirty years later, his pulse still jumped.

Robin gave him a curious frown. “Is it important? It looks old. Ancient, even. Like pre-TV ancient.”

Todd kneeled slowly. “It’s… from school.”

Robin brightened, ready to tease him about 1950s nerd life, but she caught something in his voice and softened when she put together her father's tone (which she usually struggled with.) “Can I… look?”

Todd hesitated. Instinct said *no, keep the lid on, keep the past quiet.* But the look on Robin’s face, the trust, the love, made the answer shift. He nodded. “Yeah. You can.”

Robin sat cross-legged on the floor. Todd sat beside her. She lifted the lid. Inside lay a bundle of letters tied with ribbon. Some scraps of poetry written in different handwriting, an old program from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream, a* black-and-white photograph of seven boys in a cave, all laughing, and beneath that, another photo, separated on purpose.

Two boys in winter coats. One grinning like he trusted the world. One looking at him like the world had just changed.

Robin lifted the photo carefully. “Dad… is this you?”

Todd’s throat tightened. “Yes.”

“And… this is the poet?”

Todd nodded once. “Neil. His name is- was Neil."

Robin studied the picture. “You were staring at him.”

Todd huffed a tiny laugh. “I’m surprised it’s not more obvious.”

Robin set the photo down gently. As if it were fragile, or holy, or both. “I can't see why, he looks funny." She jokes before tilting her head. "Tell me about him.”

Todd wasn’t sure he could. Not without breaking. But then he remembered the flash of fear in her eyes last night when she came out. The way she looked to him for permission to exist.

He inhaled. “I met him when I was seventeen, maybe sixteen. I was new. Quiet. Afraid of everything. He… wasn’t. Neil walked into a room like he expected it to love him. And it did.”

Robin smiled. “Sounds familiar.”

Todd nudged her shoulder. “Don’t compare yourself to him. You’re louder.”

Robin snorted.

Todd picked up the photo again, thumb tracing the corner. “He dragged me into everything. Midnight poetry, sneaking out… He made life feel bigger than I believed it could be.”

Robin watched him closely. “You loved him.” It wasn’t a question.

Todd nodded. “Very much.”

“And he loved you?”

Todd’s breath hitched, but not painfully so. Not anymore. “I think so. We never said it out loud. But we… understood each other.”

Robin reached into the box again and lifted a folded page, yellowed, creased, written in Neil’s looping handwriting. “Is this—?”

Todd nodded. “Something he wrote for the group. But he gave me that copy to keep for myself.”

Robin read the first lines silently, then set it down with reverence. “Dad… these aren’t bad. Actually they’re beautiful.”

“He was beautiful,” Todd said quietly, surprising himself. Not in embarrassment, but in acceptance.

Robin leaned her head on his shoulder. “I wish I knew him.”

Todd swallowed. “I wish he knew you. He would’ve adored you.”

Robin blinked rapidly, pretending dust was in her eyes. “Do you… like

talking about him?”

Todd considered that. For most of his life, thinking of Neil had been like touching fire, beautiful, consuming, *dangerous* fire. But sitting here now, with Robin’s hand resting over his, the photo between them like a bridge instead of a wound…

“It doesn’t hurt the way it used to,” Todd admitted. “Not when I talk about him with you.”

Robin exhaled, relieved for reasons she didn’t fully understand. “Good,” she murmured. “Because I… I want to know all of you. The things that made you you. Even the sad parts. If you have to live through my emotional teenage hormones or whatever, I can return the favor.” She grins, proud of herself for the idea.

Todd felt tears prick his eyes. He wasn’t sure if it was the relief, or the memory, or the fact that his daughter. the bright, fierce, sharp-edged girl he’d raised, looked at his past and saw something worth holding.

He squeezed her hand. “Thank you, Birdie.”

Robin bumped his shoulder. “Anytime, Dad.”

Robin returned to the box and lifted the stack of photos, spreading them across the carpet like tarot cards. “Okay,” she announced, “I want the tea. The poet tea. The full cast list of Dad’s Secret Teenage Rebellion Squad.”

Todd laughed under his breath even though he didn't fully understand her reference, if it even was one. “We weren’t that rebellious.”

“Uh-huh,” Robin said, pointing at a picture of seven boys howling with laughter in the cave. “You look like you’re summoning demons.”

“That was Pitts tripping over a root.”

“Summoning demons,” Robin repeated. “So. Roll call.”

She picked up the first photo. A candid of Charlie Dalton, shirt collar popped, a cigarette tucked behind his ear, eyes alight with mischief. Robin held it up to her face. "He looks like a total ditz.

Todd exhaled a laugh. *“Robin.* That's Charlie Dalton. Charlie was… everything at once. Loud, dramatic, impulsive. He could make you furious and inspired in the same minute.”

“So a ditz.” She laughs.

“He was brilliant, actually,” Todd said, surprising her. “Math, Latin, music, he picked things up like he was born knowing them. But he hated rules. They made him feel caged.”

Robin raised a brow. “Sounds like someone I know.”

Todd shot her a look. “I was nothing like Charlie.”

“You literally ran away from your graduation speech to go scream poetry in a cave if I remember that story right.”

Todd's ears went pink. "Okay, fine. Maybe a little."

Robin smirked and set Charlie aside. She lifted the next picture, a red haired boy with a stiff posture and a serious expression even mid-laugh. "And *he* looks like a total wannabe."

Todd pinched the bridge of his nose. *"Robin."*

"What? He does!"

Todd sighed. "Cameron wasn't a bad person. He was scared. That school… it got inside all of us, but it grabbed him the hardest. He wanted to fit the mold so badly that he couldn't handle anyone breaking it and ended up breaking out a fight the last time we saw him before it was just in the halls passing by."

"Did you hate him?"

"No," Todd said quietly. "I pitied him, really. And after everything happened… I think he was drowning in guilt, even if he'd never admit it."

Robin nodded, her expression softening. "Fear makes people do weird things."

Todd looked at her with a mixture of surprise and pride.

Robin picked up a picture of two boys — tall, lanky Pitts, adjusting glasses too big for his face. “Aw, he looks good. Probably a nerd."

Todd huffed. “He was, actually. He’d say sorry when the floor creaked.”

Robin smiled. “Aw, Dad, you had a cinnamon roll friend.”

“A what...? I- Anyway. He was kind,” Todd said, voice warm. “And patient. And he had this… dry humor that caught you off guard. He made Meeks laugh so hard once milk came out his nose.”

Robin snorted. “And that’s what real friendship is.” She points to the boy next to Pitts, wild hair and a large grin framing his face behind the glasses. "More of a nerd."

“The biggest,” Todd agreed fondly. “But he owned it. Best grades in the school. And he and Pitts were… inseparable. They built a radio together once.”

Robin perked up. “Like, electronics and everything?”

“Wired from scratch.” Todd nodded.

“Okay but why didn’t you tell me your friends were basically the Hawkins AV Club?”

Todd blinked. “The what?”

“Never mind.”

Robin held up a photo of Knox, dreamy-eyed, leaning against a tree, writing something dramatically on a notebook. “This one. This idiot. He got his heart broken a lot, didn’t he?”

Todd laughed. “Constantly. If you left him alone for ten minutes, he’d fall in love with someone.”

“Sounds exhausting.”

“It was.” Todd smiled. “But he believed in love more fiercely than anyone I’ve ever met. He made it seem… brave.”

Robin tilted her head. “So he helped you figure out what you felt for Neil?”

Todd froze. Then, softly, “Yes. In ways he never knew.”

Robin reached the last picture. Neil, laughing, his head thrown back, Todd beside him trying (and failing) not to smile at him.

Robin picked it up slowly. “Tell me about him last.”

Todd swallowed. “Neil was…” He searched for the right word. “Alive. In every sense. He felt everything loudly, joy, fear, hope. He made normal days feel like something was about to begin.”

“Did he make you feel brave?”

Todd’s breath trembled. “Yes. He made me feel like I could be more than the quiet kid in the corner. He saw something in me I didn’t believe existed.”

Robin looked at the picture thoughtfully. “He loved you.”

Todd smiled a soft, wounded, glowing smile. “I think he did.”

“And you loved him.”

Todd didn’t hesitate this time. “I did.”

Robin placed the photo down gently, like setting a flower on water. Then she leaned over, rested her head on his shoulder, and said, “I’m glad he existed.”

Todd’s eyes stung. “Me too.”

“And I’m glad you remember him,” she added. “Not just the hard parts. The real parts.”

Todd exhaled shakily. “I’m… learning to.”

Robin squeezed his hand. “Well,” she said, clearing her throat, “now I

see where I get my taste in dramatic people."

Todd laughed. "Hey—"

She pointed at Neil's picture. "Dad, you literally fell in love with a theater kid."

Todd raised his hands. "Well, I suppose I'm guilty."

Robin grinned. "Runs in the family."

And in that moment, surrounded by old ghosts and new understanding, the past didn't feel like a weight. It felt like a lineage. A story passed down. A love that didn't end.

A legacy Robin was now part of.

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